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Health care worker protection during an influenza pandemic

This fact sheet provides basic information for health care workers.

Under the Occupational Health and Safety Act, organizations that employ health care workers have a legal obligation to take all reasonable precautions to protect them. Health care workers also have an obligation to use the protective equipment supplied by their employers.

In environments where people with infectious diseases are treated, there is no such thing as “total protection” or “zero risk” for patients, visitors or health care workers, but there are steps that health care settings and health care workers can take to reduce the risk during an influenza pandemic. The spread of the influenza virus in health care settings can be minimized by consistently using best practices in infection prevention and control for respiratory infections.

All health care settings and health care workers are expected to follow routine infection control practices on a day to day basis.

Guidance being developed by the Provincial Infectious Disease Advisory Committee (PIDAC) should be followed for any patient, client or resident presenting with febrile respiratory illness (FRI).

Additional Infection Prevention and Control Practices during a Pandemic

During a pandemic, health care settings will replace FRI surveillance with surveillance for influenza-like-illness (ILI), i.e. they will treat all patients and visitors with symptoms of FRI as though they have influenza until that diagnosis is ruled out.

Contact and droplet precautions will be followed

Health care settings will:

- maintain accessible hand hygiene stations and signs advising patients, visitors and staff to perform hand hygiene.
- ensure health care workers have easy access to personal protective equipment and other supplies they need to take appropriate precautions.
- educate patients and staff about the steps they can take to reduce the risk of infection and ensure Joint Health and Safety Committees are actively engaged in occupational health and safety issues within health care facilities.

Health care workers will use the following contact and droplet precautions with patients presenting with FRI/ILI:

- a surgical mask covering the user’s nose and mouth when providing direct care within one metre of the patient
- protective eyewear when providing direct care
- hand hygiene (i.e., washing hands or using alcohol based hand rub or sanitizer: before seeing the patient, after seeing the patient and before touching the face, and after removing and disposing of personal protective equipment)
- examination procedures that minimize contact with droplets (e.g., sitting next to rather than in front of a coughing patient when taking a history or conducting an examination)

- appropriate gloves when they are likely to have contact with body fluids or to touch contaminated surfaces
- gowns during procedures when clothing might be contaminated

Practices to limit contact with infected patients/residents

Health care settings are encouraged to implement policies to limit unprotected contact with infected patients including:

- minimizing crowding and maintaining one metre separation between patients/residents
- assessing patients with influenza in a separate area of the facility
- accommodating patients with symptoms in a separate area away from other patients
- restricting patient activities and movement
- cohorting influenza patients in rooms and wards with other influenza patients

High-Risk Procedures

If possible, high risk procedures (e.g. bronchoscopy, sputum induction) on patients with ILI should be delayed. Where this is not possible, then the precautions for high-risk procedures as outlined in the PIDAC FRI document should be followed.

Vaccines and Antivirals

Because of the crucial role that health care workers will play during a pandemic, they are considered a priority group for both antivirals and vaccine.

For more information

www.health.gov.on.ca/english/providers/program/emu/emu_mn.html

Or call toll free:

Health Care Provider's Hotline 1-866-212-2272

Recommended Process for Removing Personal Protective Equipment

- Remove gloves and discard using a glove-to-glove/skin-to-skin technique.
- Remove gown (discard in linen hamper in a manner that minimizes air disturbance).

Once the health care worker is more than one metre distance from the patient:

- Use alcohol hand rinse (or wash hands).
- Remove protective eyewear and discard or place in clear plastic bag and send for decontamination as appropriate.
- Remove mask and discard.
- Use alcohol hand rinse again (or rewash hands).

Some key points about protecting patients

- The same precautions used to protect health care workers will also protect patients.
- Hand hygiene is a very important practice in preventing the spread of influenza.
- Patients look to health care workers for advice and guidance. Health care workers should encourage all patients to practice hand hygiene and use a mask or tissue to cover their mouth when coughing.
- Health care workers are encouraged to provide tissues or surgical masks for patients and clients who are coughing or sneezing.
- If patients see health care workers using such precautions consistently, they are more likely to do the same.